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Petroglyphs

of Pennsylvania



Pennsylvania State Library
Document Section

Petroglyphs of Pennsylvania

Petroglyphs are images carved by early peoples into rock surfaces. These carvings may include lines, dots, human, animal, supernatural, and symbolic designs. In Pennsylvania, most were made by chiseling rock with harder stones. In Africa and Europe they can be tens of thousands years old; however, Pennsylvania petroglyphs are considered to have been made within the past 1,000 years. Similar designs may have also been portrayed on wood, baskets, and clothing, but these artifacts rarely survive in the archaeology of Eastern North America. Therefore, petroglyphs provide a rare glimpse into the minds of ancient Native Americans.

Petroglyph Locations

(see images surrounding map for locations and specific examples)

Less than 40 Native American petroglyph sites are recorded in the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey files. While occassionally found in upland settings, most are in prominent locations near water. Sites range from clusters of a few designs to hundreds of images.

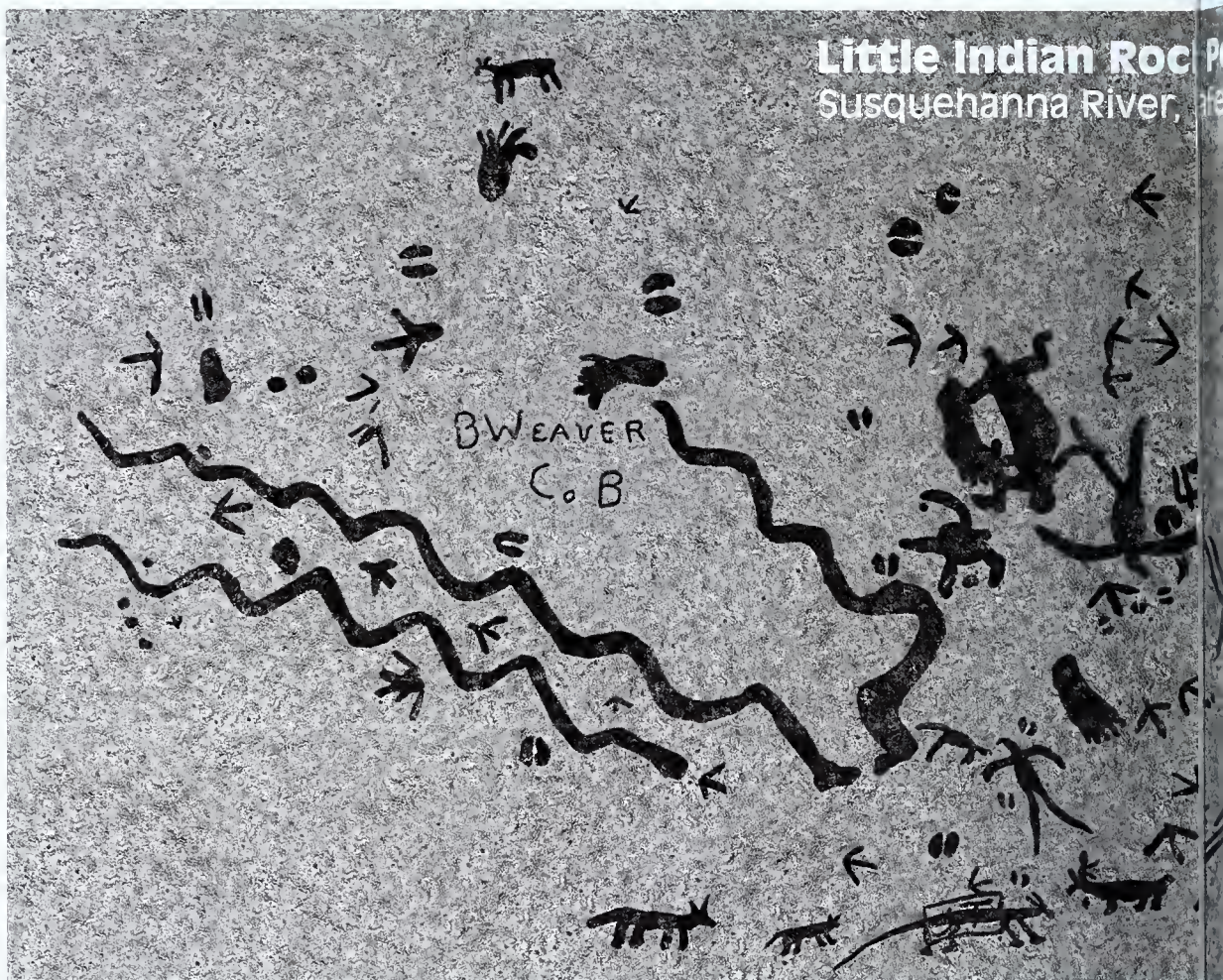
Nearly 30 sites are recorded in the Ohio watershed. Along the Allegheny River, Indian God Rock and Parkers Landing sites contain many naturalistic designs along with part-human, part-animal images. The so-called "Water Panther" at Parkers Landing is a spectacular rendition of a common design in the Algonquian belief system.

The lower Susquehanna watershed has the highest concentration of petroglyphs in the Northeastern United States with over 1,000 carved designs recorded at 10 sites. Hydroelectric dams on this portion of the Susquehanna River submerged many of these petroglyphs and many were removed for preservation by archaeologists. This watershed contains a variety of designs that can be classified into three distinct styles: the Bald Friar group, the Walnut Island petroglyph, and the Safe Harbor group.

The **Bald Friar group** (just below the Pa. state line in Md.) consists of carvings of concentric circles, sunbursts, tree-like stick figures, and designs that could be interpreted as stylized fish or human masks.

The **Walnut Island petroglyph** consists of designs that are distinctive from all others in Pennsylvania. Although not related to the writings of Asian cultures, these abstract designs are stikingly similar to symbols of the Far East.

In the **Safe Harbor group**, the largest and best known sites are Big Indian Rock and Little Indian Rock. There are more than 300 petroglyphs on seven rock islands. Images at these sites include human and animal figures, their foot prints and tracks, as well as symbols like circles and dots.



Little Indian Rock
Susquehanna River,

The above illustration simulates the appearance of the petroglyphs on the rock surface.

Conventionalized Symbols	Tracks	Animals

Only one petroglyph site has been recorded on the Delaware River. The Jennings petroglyph (N.J.), with similar designs found at the Safe Harbor group, is a large rock containing more than 30 images.

Interpreting the Meaning of Petroglyphs

Archaeologists agree that petroglyphs are a form of symbolic communication and not simply prehistoric graffiti as previously believed. Because of the amount of work involved in crafting them, it is generally assumed that they were created with serious intentions. Petroglyphs probably served many functions, but

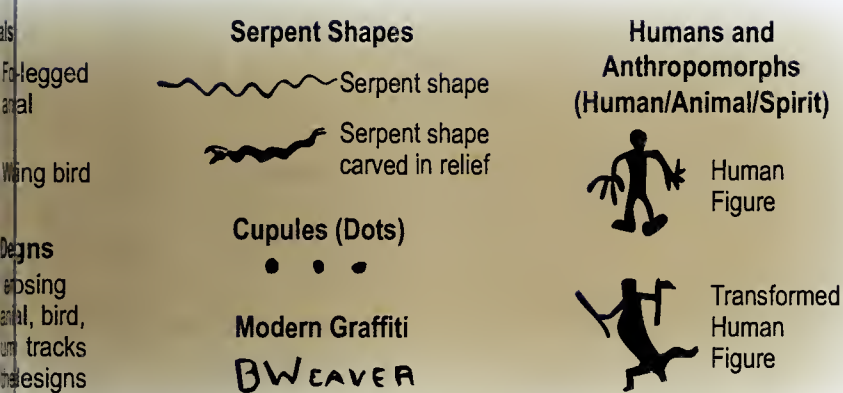


Little Indian Rock, part of the Safe Harbor group

Petroglyph Safe Harbor, Pa.



actual petroglyph designs at Little Indian Rock.



group, as seen on the Susquehanna River.

who lived in or had passed through the region. Prominent petroglyphs such as Big Indian Rock and Indian God Rock could have served as boundary markers.

Some sites may have been places where medicine men, community, or spiritual leaders went to receive guidance

their specific meanings are unknown.

Petroglyph sites may have been special, possibly sacred places. Carving images could have formalized and increased their significance. Perhaps some designs conveyed information indicating good hunting grounds or describing the people

to help or heal their people. Serving as "teaching rocks," youth may have been brought to these places to learn about their culture and the world around them.

At Safe Harbor, some petroglyphs appear to have astronomical significance. Six snake symbols point to the sunrise or sunset positions for the annual equinox and solstices. These events are important in determining when to plant and harvest crops and people all over the world have developed methods for determining these dates. It is not surprising that Native American groups would have also marked these events.

Ethics and Visiting Petroglyph Sites

Great care must be used when visiting petroglyph sites. Many Native Americans consider these sites as sacred gifts from their ancestors, therefore, visitors should treat these sites with respect as any other place

of reverence. Petroglyphs may appear to be in good condition, but even touching them lightly eventually causes wear. They should not be walked on with shoes, colored with paint, chalk, crayons, or any other medium. The best way to record the images is to photograph them under good low-angle lighting conditions, usually early morning or late in the day.

Several museums in Pennsylvania have castings or actual petroglyphs on display. The State Museum of Pennsylvania exhibits actual petroglyphs from Walnut Island and Cresswell Rock. In addition, Web sites are a quick and easy way to view petroglyphs.

For more information visit www.PaArchaeology.state.pa.us.

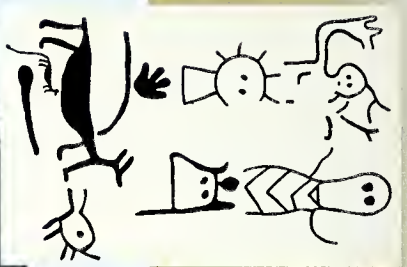
Our Heritage

To everyone, petroglyphs are irreplaceable and represent unique insights into past cultures. They are a major contribution to our understanding and heritage of Pennsylvania's past.

Discovering Petroglyphs

If you find a petroglyph, please alert the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and record the site with the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS). Information, recording forms, and instructions can be obtained at www.PaArchaeology.state.pa.us.

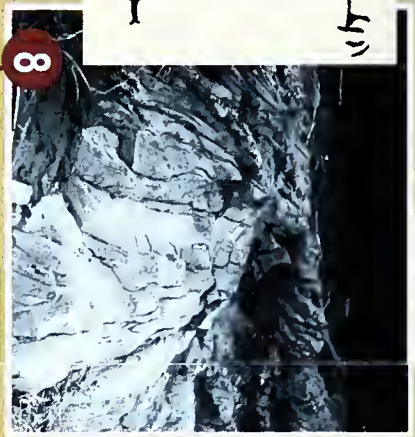
Petroglyphs of Pennsylvania



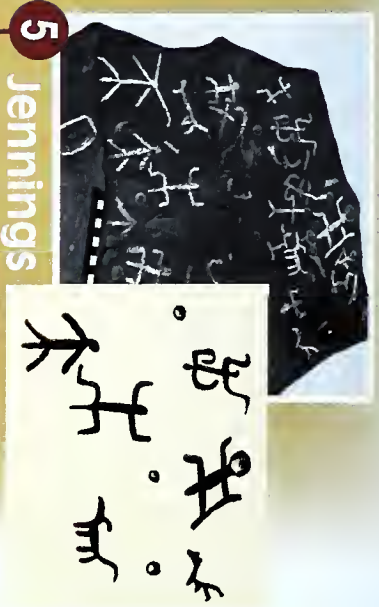
Indian God Rock



Walnut Island



Jennings



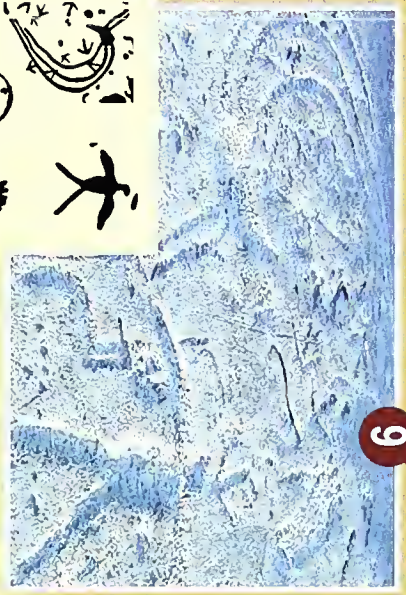
Parkers Landing



Bald Friar



12



Little Indian Rock

9



Site Name	Watershed
1 Indian God Rock	Allegheny River
2 Rainbow Rocks	Upland Site
3 Cooksburg Bridge	Clarion River
4 Parkers Landing	Allegheny River
5 Jennings	Delaware River, N.J.
6 Traister	Upland Site
7 Smith's Ferry	Ohio River
8 Midland	Ohio River
9 Cresswell Rock	Susquehanna River
10 Walnut Island	Susquehanna River
11 Conestoga Rock	Susquehanna River
12 Circle Rock	Susquehanna River
13 Eagle Rock	Susquehanna River
14 Little Indian Rock	Susquehanna River
15 Turkey Track Rock	Susquehanna River
16 Big Indian Rock	Susquehanna River
17 Francis Farm	Upland Site
18 Millboro	Upland Site
19 Sugar Grove	Upland Site
20 Dunn Farm	Upland Site
21 New Geneva	Monongahela River
22 Bald Friar	Susquehanna R., Md.

(Multiple locations within site groups are listed north to south)

Petroglyphs

Archaeology is the study of past human behavior. It seeks to identify patterns in human activity and explain how and why they change. Archaeology is also descriptive. It paints a picture of how people once lived. Using information recovered from the ground, archaeologists can reconstruct the histories of societies who do not have written records as well as minority populations who were insufficiently documented due to their social standing.

One way archaeologists study the past is by examining locations (sites) where people once lived, played, and worked. Prehistoric and historic sites are non-renewable resources. When a site is destroyed, information about the past is lost forever. Unfortunately, sites are ruined on a daily basis due to modern development, urban sprawl, and looting. Because unrecorded archaeological sites are those most often destroyed, every effort must be made to locate, evaluate, and record their content for the benefit of future Pennsylvanians before a development project is undertaken. If you know of locations where artifacts have been found and wish to assist with the preservation of archaeological sites, we encourage you to record these locations with the Pennsylvania Archaeological Site Survey (PASS). Information, recording forms, and instructions can be obtained at:

- www.pennsylvaniaarchaeology.com
- www.PaArchaeology.state.pa.us
- www.phmc.state.pa.us/bhp/



Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission

Edward G. Rendell, Governor
Wayne Spilove, Chairman
Barbara Franco, Executive Director

www.phmc.state.pa.us

Contributors

The Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology, Inc.
The Pennsylvania Archaeological Council
The Safe Harbor Water Power Corporation

The activity that is the subject of this brochure has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the Department of the Interior.

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Office of Equal Opportunity
National Park Service
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The cover painting is Parker's Landing Petroglyphs by Larry A. Small.



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